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*Ruža Tokić*

## **'Traditional bonds between Orthodox brothers'**

### **Notions of Greek-Serbian Friendship**

The notion of a special relationship between Greece and Serbia and a feeling of attachment due to historical and cultural factors has been fostered at least since the formation of the Greek and Serbian national states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the public discourse of both countries [Livianos 2003]. Depending on the political upswings and downswings, this discourse saw different tides: In times of co-belligerence as it was the case in the Balkan Wars, it served the interests of the foreign policies of both states, whereas it was ignored during and after the Greek Civil War against the background of Tito's support for the Greek communists. Although historical examples of positive stereotyping of the other existed, it was not until the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s that the idea of a traditionally contingent friendship was constructed and perpetuated in the Greek and Serbian media.<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of an "ever-lasting and existing friendship", the shared Orthodox faith and Byzantine heritage, the pioneering task in the "national uprisings and fights" against the Ottomans and the co-belligerence in different wars as well as dynastic relations were defined as determining factors. On this ground a "common destiny" and "special emotional solidarity and proximity" between both nations was postulated. Thus, the sympathies and the support of the majority of the Greek public for the 'Serbian side' during the 1990s, which became evident especially in the huge amount of humanitarian aid from Greece to Serbia and the Serbian population in Bosnia and Croatia, were interpreted as "historically determined" and "natural".

As a striking example, the visit of Radovan Karadžić to Greece in 1993 epitomises the idea of a traditional friendship connecting two "brotherly Orthodox nations that have always fought together on the same side" – a discourse that is still evident and widely spread in the internet and among Greek-Serbian friendship circles. At this time an outcast in Western Europe, the Greek Orthodox Church invited the leader of the Bosnian Serbs to Athens, where he was warmly welcomed in the Piraeus Stadium by a huge audience, among them prominent political dignitaries. On the occasion of this visit, he made a statement that became a dictum: "Everybody is telling us to lay down our arms because we are alone. We say no, we are not alone. We have with us God and the Greeks!" [Michas 2002, Karčić 2008].

The discourse of the "Greek-Serbian friendship" is embedded in larger debates about the logic of friendship and enmity, group building processes and media techniques to emotionalise public opinion. Therefore, ideas, rhetorical strategies and protagonists have to be placed in their social and cultural contexts in order to identify how these contexts relate to the circumstances of their emergence, their inner dynamics and their respective mutual

<sup>1</sup> This article is a short outline of the dissertation that the author is conducting as a research assistant within the framework of the project "Post-Panslavism: Slavicness, the Slavic Idea and Anti-Slavism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries" at the GWZO (Centre for the History and Culture of East Central Europe) Leipzig and as a PhD-student at the Humboldt University Berlin.

influences. Hence, the "Greek-Serbian friendship" in the 90s has to be examined within the context of the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the old state system. This period did not only mark the beginning of a transition process in the former socialist states, but also in Greece. The turmoil on the Greek Northern border, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, witnessed a reheated outbreak of scenarios of threat to the established geopolitical order and fear of instability that were triggered in the public discourse in Greece. Against this background, Milošević's Serbia served as a projection screen for the social and emotional insecurities and anxieties of a majority of the Greek public. Being the biggest and most influential Yugoslav republic, it was imagined as a guarantor for stability on the Northern border, someone reliable and well-disposed to the "Greeks", thus narratives of the "brotherly Serbian nation" that were prominent at different periods of time, were reactivated. A wide range of Greek citizens united especially around the image of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, reaching from the extremist right with a pronounced Orthodox nationalist attitude to the extremist anti-American orientated left. In the imagination of both parties, "the Serbs were fighting our battle". In the eyes of the former, the "Serbs" were defending Orthodoxy against "the Muslims" in the Bosnian war, in a kind of remake of the battles against the Ottomans. In the eyes of the latter, Milošević as a socialist was resisting the "Western imperialists and capitalists".

It is important to point out that in this context the term "friendship" is not considered as a socio-psychological concept, but rather as a rhetorical attempt or a discursive praxis that aims at conferring stability and continuity to the political upswings and downswings of the relations between two actors. What lies beneath, is the guiding idea that a "traditional, historically conditioned and everlasting friendship" between nations does not exist, but only fragments of discourses that are reactivated and newly composed at certain times, in certain contexts, by certain actors and for certain reasons. The "Greek-Serbian friendship" in the 1990s is a striking example of creating a selective image of history and affiliation through rhetorical strategies based on the "emotional" in order to construct a historical continuity that is interpreted as "traditional".

The Greek historian Vasilis K. Gounaris for example draws on the grounds of an analysis of the Greek mass media in the second half of the 19th century the conclusion that "Unlike other Balkan peoples Serbs retained if not the love at least the sympathy of the Greeks beyond the point when other nations in the region started to loose it irrevocably. It was from the 1860s onwards (...) that the 'tradition' of the Greek-Serbian friendship was defined, enriched and treasured as symbolic capital. Everybody knew that there was no much substance in this tradition – from time to time it was admitted openly – nor direct contacts between the two peoples were particularly brisk." He continues by saying that "(...) when we deal with this 'friendship', we refer to an ideology totally constructed by Greek politicians, academics, and journalists – a new breed – not by masses who had never had direct contact with the Serbs." [Gounaris 2004]. On the other hand, the Serbian scholar Olivera Milosavljević also challenges the argument of a traditional Greek-Serbian friendship in her study on stereotypes of Serbian intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century by claiming that "In contrast to the syntagms 'Majka Rusija' (Mother Russia) and 'Braća Rusi' (Brothers Russians), which are known for the last 100 years, 'Braća Grci' (Brothers Greeks) is a completely new product of the current propaganda without any basis in the past. In fact, the Greeks had a

very bad standing in the 'characterology' of the Serbian intellectuals, sometimes even worse than the Bulgarians, and the fact that they were also Orthodox did not change anything."<sup>2</sup> Due to the negative image of the Greek dominated Orthodox clergy as corrupt and greedy, Greeks were dominantly characterised as "friends of the Turks", "haters of the Slavs" and "racketeers" in the Serbian public discourse and literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [Milosavljević 2002].

Asked in an interview with the Bosnian weekly magazine BH Dani about his opinion on the "Greek-Serbian friendship", the most prominent translator of Greek literature in former Yugoslavia Zoran Mutić stated: "I was defending the Bosnian position in the Greek media. This means that I was destroying this mendacious myth, which has primarily implications of everyday politics. First of all, in my opinion friendship is an exclusively individual category, as love is. The Greek rightists were supporting Milošević because of Orthodoxy, the Greek leftists because of their belief that he was fighting world imperialism. Apart from that, the average Greek knows barely one or two football players when it comes to Serbia. And this myth that was constructed out of nothing had had its political boom which sell-by-date has expired." [BH Dani, nr. 240, 18.01.2002].

While agreeing to a large extent with Zoran Mutić, I would challenge the assessment that the discourse of "Greek-Serbian friendship" was constructed out of nothing and that its sell-by-date has expired already. It rather connects three important ideological elements on which both the Greek and the Serbian national narratives are based, thus fixing the notion of a traditional friendship and preserving it.

The discourse of "Greek-Serbian friendship" functions precisely in the dichotomic manner of "We" vs. "the Others", thus reflecting the thinking in terms of friends and foes as national narratives usually do. It is based on three main assumptions: first, a deliberate anti-Islamic sentiment that is reflected in a sharp opposition of Turks-Albanians-Bosnian Muslims on the one side and Orthodox Serbs and Greeks on the other. The example of Greek volunteers who fought on the side of the Bosnian Serbs during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina constitutes certainly the peak of extremist thinking. But what lies beneath, is a threat scenario that was drawn during the Yugoslav wars in the Greek and Serbian media about an "Islamic arch" in the Balkans. Most of the Greeks volunteers in Bosnia stated that they were fighting for the Orthodox faith commonwealth against the Muslims and the West in Bosnia. As Anastasija Mitrofanova stated in her study on Orthodox fundamentalist in Russia, the enthusiasm for the Milošević regime was widespread in these circles throughout Europe [Mitrofanova 2005]. The second assumption is the sometimes tacit, sometimes openly admitted consent between Serbian and Greek proponents of the discourse of friendship that the "Macedonian question" was solved with the Balkan Wars and the partition of the region. Throughout the years 1991-94 the rallying cry at mass demonstrations organised all around Greece was "Common borders with Serbia". Moreover, it was Milošević himself, who was proposing a Greek-Serbian confederation in an interview to a Greek channel in 1992. Finally, a pronounced anti-Western and especially anti-American sentiment was reactivated and fostered in both media which resulted amongst others in mass demonstrations against the NATO-interventions in the Yugoslav wars that were organized around Greece in favour of Milošević's Serbia

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian into English by Ruža Tokić.

[Michas 2002].

In order to reveal how the idea of cross-national loyalty unfolds its plausibility, attractiveness and mass appeal within a society, it is important to point out that the "Greek-Serbian friendship" is rooted in the Greek and Serbian ethno-national concepts of identity. On the one hand, by naming "traditional friends" the borders between "Us" and "Them", the "traditional enemies", are hardened. On the other hand, images of friendship, brotherhood and loyalty denominate, evoke and manifest emotions, which constitute and motivate social practices and thus set people individually and collectively in motion. The nation itself is not only an "imagined" and "symbolic" one, as it is widely known, but also an emotional one that is constituted in communicative processes through techniques of emotionalisation [Frevert 2009, Saxer 2007].

In her article "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'?" Catherine Verdery poses the question how do people become national? She assumes that "a notion of inside", "a feeling of belonging" is scientifically available, but: "To research it would direct attention away from the noisy and visible rhetorics of nationalists and toward the techniques through which receptive dispositions have been quietly laid down in those to whom they appeal." [Verdery 1996].

Relating to the "Greek-Serbian friendship", instead of analysing the "noisy rhetorics" special attention should be given to the ruptures and new cleavages that result from the postulated friendship and the actual everyday praxis. In this regard, sport competitions prove to be valuable case studies. For instance, during the final match of the European Basketball championship 1995 in Athens between Yugoslavia and Lithuania, the Greek audience cheered against the Yugoslavs throughout the game, because they eliminated their team in the semi-finals, and booed them after their victory against Lithuania. This was the first major break in the till then harmonious discourse of "Greek-Serbian friendship" that was fostered in the media. The Greek media and officials reacted in a surprising way the following days by printing apologies in Serbian on front pages of Greek newspapers. On the other side, there were no apologies for attacks of the Greek embassy in Belgrade and other outbursts of anger in Serbia following the incident. Commenting on the incidents at the *Eurobasket* tournament, a Serbian journalist posed the question "Are we still brothers?" and answered in an ironical way: "Ten days after the incidents in the stadium in Athens and in front of the Greek embassy in Belgrade, it became evident that Serbs and Greeks are nevertheless brothers. It is difficult indeed, to find relations between two states that look like family affairs, especially like Balkan family affairs. (...) First, everybody was swearing that he will be faithful to his brother till death, then all at a sudden they were shouting and beating each other up, in order to beg for forgiveness at the end (...)." [Čičić 1995].

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